



# STRANGERS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON

# STRANGERS

When **COLE HARPER** is compelled to return to Wounded Sky First Nation, he finds his community in chaos: a series of shocking murders, a mysterious illness ravaging the residents, and reemerging questions about Cole's role in the tragedy that drove him away 10 years ago. With the aid of an unhelpful spirit, a disfigured ghost, and his two oldest friends, Cole tries to figure out his purpose, and unravel the mysteries he left behind a decade ago. Will he find the answers in time to save his community?

*Strangers* is the first novel in The Reckoner series.

**STRANGERS**



THE RECKONER

# STRANGERS

DAVID A. ROBERTSON



HIGHWATER  
PRESS

©2017 by David A. Robertson

Excerpts from this publication may be reproduced under licence from Access Copyright, or with the express written permission of HighWater Press, or as permitted by law.

All rights are otherwise reserved, and no part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, scanning, recording or otherwise, except as specifically authorized.



Canada Council  
for the Arts

We acknowledge the support of the Canada Council for the Arts, which last year invested \$157 million to bring the arts to Canadians throughout the country.

Nous remercions le Conseil des arts du Canada de son soutien. L'an dernier, le Conseil a investi 157 millions de dollars pour mettre de l'art dans la vie des Canadiennes et des Canadiens de tout le pays.

HighWater Press gratefully acknowledges the financial support of the Province of Manitoba through the Department of Culture, Heritage, & Tourism and the Manitoba Book Publishing Tax Credit, and the Government of Canada through the Canada Book Fund (CBF), for our publishing activities.

HighWater Press is an imprint of Portage & Main Press.

Printed and bound in Canada by Friesens

Design by Relish New Brand Experience

Cover Art by Peter Diamond

24 23 22 21 20 19 18 17 1 2 3 4 5

Print ISBN 978-1-55379-676-3

EPUB ISBN 978-1-55379-737-1

PDF ISBN 978-1-55379-738-8

MOBI ISBN 978-1-55379-806-4

### **Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication**

Robertson, David, 1977-, author Strangers / by David Alexander Robertson.

(The Reckoner ; book one) Issued in print and electronic formats.

ISBN 978-1-55379-676-3 (softcover).--ISBN 978-1-55379-737-1 (EPUB).

--ISBN 978-1-55379-738-8 (PDF)

I. Title. II. Series: Robertson, David, 1977-. . Reckoner ; bk. 1

PS8585.O32115S77 2017

jC813'6

C2017-905166-0

C2017-905167-9

HIGHWATER  
PRESS



Toll-Free: 1-800-667-9673

[www.highwaterpress.com](http://www.highwaterpress.com)

DEDICATED TO MY KIDS.  
ALL FIVE OF 'EM.  
LOVE YOU GUYS.





## PROLOGUE

### **“SHIT,” ASHLEY WHISPERED.**

The coyote strolled out from the woods and through the mist, towards him. Ashley looked around frantically, assessing if he could outrun the animal. He couldn't go backwards: Silk River was behind him, too deep and wide to be an escape route. The coyote shook its head. *Did coyotes do that?* Then the animal scoffed. There was no denying it. *It scoffed.*

“I can't even,” the coyote said.

“Are you...” Ashley started, but the words escaped him.

“Going to kill you?” the coyote asked. “Going to chase you through the woods in some dramatic scene?”

“I...I...”

“Nah, not my style. I mean, that sure would make for an exciting start, though, wouldn't it?”

The animal waited for Ashley to respond, but Ashley was in a state of shock. He'd traded in his tense muscles, ready for fight or flight, for pale, clammy skin.

“But you have nothing to be afraid of, my young friend.”

“You're talking. You were scoffing and now you're talking.” Ashley pointed at the coyote, his index finger trembling.

“Well, yes. I scoff when appropriate, naturally. Right then you were figuring out if you could outrun me, if I were, in fact, here to kill you. Imminently scoff-worthy. Four legs good, two legs bad, am I right? Know what I'm saying?”

The coyote continued towards Ashley. At the teenager's feet, it casually turned into a man. He adjusted the lapels on his baby blue suit, straightened his top hat, and stroked the orange feather sticking out of its band. The man stood there, shoulder to shoulder with Ashley.

"Ashley, I presume," he said and extended a hand.

Ashley nodded and shook the man's hand weakly. "Yeah. Ashley. I'm Ashley."

"You can call me Choch."

"Choch."

"Ash," Choch said, "we're not going to get anywhere if you simply repeat whatever I say. You watch enough television to not get so enthralled by an anthropomorphic spirit being."

"An anthropo...po—"

Choch rolled his eyes animatedly as he interrupted, "—morphic, *really*." Exasperated, he prompted Ashley with, "Mickey Mouse? Roger Rabbit?"

"I don't—"

"Well, it's neither here nor there. Unimportant."

Choch sat down on a rock and patted the edge of it, inviting Ashley to sit down as well. Ashley sat. He wasn't sure what else he could do, or if he had a choice. Choch took a cell phone out of his pocket and handed it to Ashley.

"You can give this back to Brady, by the way, when you see him."

The phone was in Ashley's hand, but Ashley wasn't looking at it. His eyes were trained on Choch, his mouth agape. "What is happening?" he breathed.

"Are you asking me, or..." Choch raised his eyebrows, looked up without actually moving his head "...you know. Because, to be truthful, to be absolutely 100 percent honest, most of the time he's just, 'Whatever. Free will. Not my problem.' Like that, sorta. Only he has a bit of a drawl or something. I wouldn't say southern drawl, though. More like—"

"No, I just...what the hell. You literally just turned into a man. You were a...a fricking animal."

“It takes all kinds. You’ll get used to it.”

Ashley started to rotate Brady’s phone in his hand. “How’d you even...”

“Get the phone? Oh, I’m really quite sneaky. You don’t know the *half* of it.”

Ashley unlocked the phone and scrolled through the last several messages between him and Brady, the plans they had made to meet here, this clearing deep within Blackwood Forest that had become “their place” over the last few weeks. It was beautiful—there always seemed to be a mist hanging over Silk River, like a descended cloud—and private. Now it seemed as though this particular text conversation hadn’t been with Brady, but with Choch. But why? Ashley pored over the conversation as though the answers were embedded in Choch’s texts and the emoji were syllabics that would divulge secrets. But the emoji didn’t give anything away. The bulk of them were obviously meaningless, like the smiling pile of poop Brady responded with when Ashley was too busy to meet because of homework.

Ashley stuffed the phone into his pocket.

“Why’d you bring me out here?”

Choch put his arm around Ashley. “Look around, Ash. Very cool setting, am I wrong? Imagine starting things out in the grocery store, surrounded by overpriced fruits and veggies, not this beauty before us.”

“No, why all the *trouble* to bring me out here?”

“It wasn’t too much of a bother, really. Don’t you go and worry about little old me.”

“For what!? And why me?”

“Bingo! There it is. The seven-million-dollar question. I’ve been totally dying to tell you, but you were far too freaked out. See? You get used to it, right?”

“Just tell me why I’m here, okay? So I can leave.”

“Well, you’re no fun. *Fine*. I want you to ask Cole Harper to come back home, if you will. Please.”

Ashley stood up. “What? No way.”

“Yes way.”

“If you know anything about Cole and why he doesn’t live here anymore, and you clearly *don’t*, you’d know asking me to do that is weirder than a...a goddamn talking coyote.”

“Weirder than a goddamn talking coyote transforming into a goddamn human being?”

To demonstrate, Choch transformed into a coyote, then back into a man.

“Yeah, kind of.”

“Still,” Choch said, “I’d like you to *convince*—because *ask* probably isn’t the right word, knowing the boy (*and I do know the boy, dear people*)—Mr. Harper to come back home where he belongs. *Pretty please.*”

“Sorry. There’s no way Cole is coming home, and I wouldn’t ask him to anyway.”

Choch made a *tsk-tsk-tsk* sound. “Well, that’s really too bad. You’re the only person here who talks to the kid.”

Ashley shook his head. “Cole’s just some messed up guy who’s dealt with a lot of shit. Leave him alone. Can I go now?”

“Tell me what you *really* think.” Choch slapped his hands against his knees and stood up. “Okay, well, this has been a slice. I feel like we should hug it out.”

“Are you serious?”

Choch closed his eyes, extended his arms, and nodded sharply. At this point, Ashley was willing to do anything to get this over with—except ask Cole to come home. He leaned forward and let Choch gather him up into his arms and give him a squeeze around his waist. Choch smelled like he’d shoved about fifty lavender-scented air fresheners into his suit pockets.

They backed away from each other awkwardly.

“There we are,” Choch said. “Now, like I said, a *slice*. Nice to meet you. Sorry about all the, you know, deception and whatnot. Had to give it a shot, right?”

“Right,” Ashley said, and turned to leave, intent on going directly to Brady’s house to tell him all about—

“*Nuh-uh,*” Choch said. “Our secret. I insist.”

Ashley shrugged and fast-walked out of the clearing, not willing to argue and wondering if it would do any good anyway. Brady believed in this kind of shit, in theory. But would he really buy that a coyote had just tricked his boyfriend into meeting by Silk River? Hell, with each step Ashley took he was questioning whether or not *he'd* actually seen what he had. He must've. He didn't drink, didn't do drugs, and had never hallucinated anything before, let alone a character from the myths and legends he'd learned from Elders growing up.

"You can tell Brady, though, that he needs a better password on his phone!" Choch called out, as though in response to Ashley's internal skepticism. "4-3-2-1, really?! That was literally the first thing I tried!"





**ASHLEY: You need to come home. Now.**

Joe and Cole were alone on the basketball court, hours before classes began. Cole's sneakers let out a shrill squeak as he pivoted and turned towards Joe. He received the basketball from Joe, cut to the hoop with two quick dribbles, paused, found the ball's ridges with his fingertips, and shot. The ball arched through the air and then clanged off the rim. Sneakers against hardwood and the thud of the basketball being dribbled—even the stubborn sound of a bricked shot—were like music to Cole. He would've rather heard the mesh snap as his ball swished past the rim, but the game, the court, was his calm place. He needed it, especially now.

*You need to come home.*

*Now.*

The only basketball-related sound Cole hated was the crowd. He never liked the roars, and never liked so many eyes on him. He always felt like he needed to take his anti-anxiety medication before a game.

The ball trailed away from Joe and Cole in progressively smaller bounces.

"If only you could shoot like you throw a pick," Joe said.

Cole half-smiled. Even though he'd been the team's leading scorer last year, the stuff he did away from the ball—throwing picks, boxing out, guarding the other team's best player—had always been his thing. In fact, his coach had told him to go easy on the picks last year after

he'd knocked a player out of a game in the playoffs. Broke the guy's rib. His coach didn't know that Cole was already going easy, and gauging just how easy to take it was often the problem.

Cole jogged after the ball, picked it up, and dribbled back over to Joe. He passed the ball to Joe, and then positioned himself under the hoop as though a defender was behind him.

"I can shoot," Cole said, ready for the rebound.

"Yeah," Joe shrugged and released the ball. The mesh snapped as the ball passed through the metal ring. It dropped into Cole's arms. "But you can really throw a pick."

A few minutes later, the boys were sitting with their open gym bags at the side of the court. Joe didn't waste time. He was already getting his jeans on as soon as they'd sat down. Cole, meanwhile, hadn't even untied a shoelace. He was staring at the gymnasium ceiling, at a birdie stuck in the rafters. The same one had been there since he'd started high school. Ashley's text kept scrolling through Cole's mind.

*You need to come home.*

*Now.*

Joe kicked Cole lightly on the arm, bringing him back to the real world.

"Doing anything this weekend, or are you all zoned in for tryouts?"

"I took some shifts at the community centre," Cole said.

Joe chuckled and shook his head. "Dude, you're either playing ball, doing homework, or working at that shithole."

"I have to save money for university, man. My grandma doesn't have money to pay for it."

"What about your aunt? She lives with you too, right?"

"Yeah, but that's the thing, Joe. If my grandma doesn't have the money, it means my auntie doesn't have the money. She supports both of us. Usually works sixteen-hour days just to get us by."

"*Dude*," Joe intoned. "Dude" could mean a million different things. Here, Cole interpreted it as: "*Holy shit, that's rough.*"

"Anyway, I think by June I'll have enough for my first year's tuition. Mostly."

Joe started buttoning his shirt up. Cole was trying to twirl the basketball on his finger for more than ten seconds straight, still in his sweat-drenched shorts and shirt, still with tied shoelaces.

“So won’t your band pay for anything?” Joe asked. “They do that, right?”

Cole shook his head and slapped the basketball to get it spinning harder. It wobbled and fell off his finger. He caught it and started the process over again. “I don’t need their help.”

“Whatever, dude.” Joe stuffed his gym clothes into his bag, then slung it and his backpack over his shoulder.

“Besides,” Cole said, “if I work *and* get that scholarship, I’ll be fine.”

“Yeah,” Joe said. “Sure. But then you might want to work on that jump shot.” And with a parting, “Later,” he left Cole alone in the gym.

“Later,” Cole said, but the heavy gym doors had already slammed shut. The gym seemed even quieter now. Cole felt more alone. He didn’t mind the feeling. But he did mind the message from Ashley, a message he couldn’t ignore anymore. He fished into his gym bag and pulled out his phone. Read the text over again.

ASHLEY: **You need to come home. Now.**

Cole took a deep breath, then responded: **Very funny.**

As soon as Cole had sent the text, he saw the bubbled ellipsis by Ashley’s name.

ASHLEY: **I’m not joking, Cole. This is serious. Come home.**

Cole’s heart started to pound, fast and hard. His hands were shaking and his head was swimming. He gripped the bench to keep from falling over. He rifled through his gym bag until he found what he was looking for. He fumbled with the cap, managed to get it off, and took an anti-anxiety pill.

The first time he’d had a panic attack Cole’s teacher had to call an ambulance. He was eight years old and walking into his fourth-grade class in the city for the first time. All the kids stared in his direction. He remembered Mrs. Benjamin screaming, “Call 9-1-1!” just before he’d blacked out. Next thing he knew he was in Grace Hospital Emergency, eerily calm. Months later, he started to see a therapist.

Now, Cole closed his eyes. He breathed in through his nose, right into his stomach, for five seconds, held it, and then breathed out through his mouth for seven seconds. He repeated this several times until he'd calmed, through the breathing or the pills. Sometimes he couldn't tell which.

COLE: **You're an asshole for even asking that.**

Cole muted his phone and threw it deep into his gym bag. He reached down to his shoes, but instead of undoing the laces he tightened them. He walked back onto the court with the basketball and stood at the foul line. He stared at the rim until its orange metal turned into Ashley's texts. *You need to come home. Now. I'm not joking, Cole. This is serious. Come home.* He bounced the ball once, let out a guttural scream, and charged towards the hoop. He leapt into the air and dunked the basketball with both hands, as hard as he could. He dunked the ball about two million times before class started.

It was a wonder he didn't shatter the backboard.

At 3:41 p.m. Cole stood in front of his opened locker, staring at the gym bag which he had put at the bottom. Throughout the day, he had piled textbooks and binders on to the bag. He had his hands in his pockets. One of those hands was wrapped around his pill bottle, which was always on his person, just in case.

"Dude." Joe walked up and stood beside Cole. They both stared into the locker.

"Hey." Cole didn't look away from the gym bag.

"I thought my shit was messy," Joe said. "Ever seen *Hoarders*?"

"I don't usually—"

"Like, there could be a black hole in there and nobody would know it. Matthew McConaughey could be behind that big stack of textbooks screaming out 'Murph! Don't leave me, Murph!' and, you know, the world would end because there's just—"

"Okay, I get it. I don't keep my locker like this. You know that. I'm trying to—"

“Great movie, though. Every time, I’m like, ‘I’m not going to cry,’ and then *boom. Crying.*”

“—hide my phone from me.”

“Waterworks, you know?”

They fell silent. They kept standing, staring, and the hallways started to empty. Kids rushing for buses. Kids rushing for rides. Kids just rushed. Except Joe and Cole.

“Why do you think my friend from Wounded Sky would ask me to come home?” Cole asked, finally verbalizing a question he’d asked himself all day.

“Dude, I don’t even know why you left in the first place. You’re just always weird about it,” Joe said.

“I could just ignore him, right? I could leave my gym bag right where it is, and come back and get it for tryouts on Monday.”

“Your bag would be stinky as shit, dude.”

“And by then, if it’s such an emergency, maybe Ashley will have given up, you know? We could both pretend like it never happened, go about our lives...”

“Okay, I don’t want to play the devil’s advocate, but what if *because* it’s an emergency, you should, like, go?”

“You were just literally playing devil’s advocate there, you know that, right?”

Joe shrugged. “Sorry.”

“What could be the emergency? Shit happens there, Joe. Like, last year, there was this flood. That was an emergency. What could I have done? Help sandbag? Ashley didn’t text me to come. There was no *come-home-now* crap.”

“I’ve sandbagged before. By the Red River. Last year too. Got free lunch, and we got paid. It was dope, for real. I took you to the Ex with that money, dude. Remember that?”

“Two years ago, they had a flu epidemic. Ashley got sick. I remember how sick he got. I thought he was going to die he got so sick. If he’d have asked me to come out then, maybe, you know? Maybe I would’ve come.”

*“Dude.”*

“But that’s the thing, Joe. He wouldn’t have asked me, even then. He knows better than to ask me.”

Cole kept his eyes trained on the gym bag, crushed as it was underneath the textbooks and binders. He could feel Joe’s eyes on him.

“But you should’ve gone, right? That’s your bro, right?”

*Holy shit.* Joe’s comment hit Cole hard. It at once felt like it was overstepping, as though Cole hadn’t just invited Joe’s opinion, but he was 100 percent right. Absolutely, he should’ve gone when Ashley was sick. When Cole had graduated from grade eight, and was about to move onto high school, Ashley flew down to the city for the day just to see him graduate. Cole wasn’t even sick. Ashley just knew how difficult school had been for Cole, and always would be. Grade eight graduations were so innocuous; near-death sicknesses were not. Cole pried his eyes away from the locker, and swivelled around to face Joe. He said, rushed and angry, “Thanks. *Really* appreciate that, man. I’ll see you Monday.”

Joe threw his arms up in frustration, turned around and walked away. “Redirect anger much, dude?”

“Whatever.” Cole turned back to his locker. He stared at the gym bag for a moment longer, then grumbled, “Screw it,” under his breath. He pulled out the gym bag and fished through it, right to the bottom, and pulled out the phone. He had eighteen new text messages. Standing in front of his opened locker, some textbooks spilled onto the floor by his feet. Cole made his way through them.

**You’re the asshole if you don’t come back, Cole,** said one text from Ashley, sent immediately after Cole threw the phone into his gym bag this morning.

Seventeen others followed. None of them told Cole why he was needed home, but they all kept asking him to come home anyway—except for the one that read, **Sorry, you’re not an asshole, you’re just acting like one.**

**Cole, when have I ever asked you for anything?**

**There’s a flight that leaves tonight at 10 p.m.**

**If you're still thinking about it, there's one that leaves tomorrow too. 3 p.m.  
Did you turn your phone off? That doesn't make this go away!**

**Dishonest Cole swore he'd come back if he was needed, now re-  
fuses. Sad!**

**Okay, that was low, but you did say that, years ago. I NEED YOU!**

On and on they went. When Cole was done reading through them all, he began to write back to Ashley, but he erased what he had written several times—because he didn't know what to say, because he didn't know what to ask, because his thumbs were shaking so badly that he misspelled almost every word. Finally, he took a deep breath and wrote back, **You need to tell me why, or else this conversation is over, no matter how many times you ask.** Then, as calmly as he could, he slipped the phone into his pocket beside his pills. He got his school bag, placed the books that had fallen onto the floor back into his locker, shut it, and made his way outside.

Usually, he took the bus home. Auntie Joan could only afford a place in a different area of the city, but she insisted he attended schools in a better area; the schools around where they stayed were “too rough” for him. He would've gone to those schools, would've felt comfortable, but arguing with her wasn't much good. After all, it was she, not his grandma, who'd decided that they—herself, Cole, and his grandma—should move away from the community. His grandma had thought they should stay. That's what Cole's parents would've wanted, she'd said to Joan. Moving away wasn't just removing unwanted attention from Cole, it was removing community, culture, language, traditions... *everything*. It was a trade-off, his auntie had argued.

“It'll be too hard for you, you'll see,” Auntie Joan told Cole on the night before they left. It had always made Cole feel weak (one of the reasons why Cole needed anti-anxiety medication now, as he and his therapist had figured out over the years). Of course, everything he'd lost in the tragedy, and his role in it, was probably a greater contributing factor. So, they moved. They left almost everything behind and started fresh. Lived in a “rough” neighbourhood, went to a nice school.

Cole started on the hour-long walk home.

He hated the idea of going back to Wounded Sky, but maybe Ashley deserved as much. He couldn't imagine, though, what it would take to make his auntie agree to let him go back. That's who Ashley would really have to convince. Not him, not his grandma.

Cole's phone stayed silent during the walk. Given Ashley's persistence throughout the day, this surprised Cole. As he passed the familiar landmarks he usually saw from city transit he thought about Wounded Sky more than he had over the last ten years. Rather than fight them off, he willingly recalled memories from his childhood. Mostly, the memories centred on the close friends he had. Ashley. Brady. Eva. Mostly Eva. They came in fragments with her, like a remembered dream. Taking off their shoes and splashing around at the banks of Silk River. Cole helping her with math, and she helping him with Cree. How she always smelled like clean laundry. Watching every tear curl down her cheek when she learned he was leaving. Cole was certain he, his grandma, and his auntie moved away almost exactly ten years ago. He wondered if that was why Ashley wanted him to come home. If that were the case, then there was no way he would go.

Grade twelve graduation. He could go for that. A far more important event than an eighth-grade ceremony. That way, he'd have a full year to work up the courage. The thought of some messed up ten-year reunion bothered Cole so much that he texted Ashley again when he got to the front of the apartment complex.

**This isn't about a memorial or anything, is it?**

By the time he'd climbed up to the third floor of the building, got into his apartment and out of his shoes, he received a simple reply: **Come on, Cole. No.**

"Hey Grandma! Hey Auntie Joan!" Cole called out after positioning his shoes between theirs, against the wall in the entryway, just so. He could hear the television set blaring. Sounded like *CSI*. Somebody was talking about blood splatter. Maybe it was *Dexter*.

His phone buzzed in his hand. **I mean, there is a memorial on Tuesday, but that's not why.**

"Tansi, nosisim!" his grandma called back.

(FYI, dear reader: “*nósisim*” is a Cree word that means “my grandchild.” Fun fact: it can mean either my grandson or my granddaughter. Very forward-thinking. Choch out.)

The television set muted. Cole made his way into the living room as he wrote back, **Right. Knew it**, to Ashley and, his anger returning, shoved the phone into his pocket.

“Sorry I’m late,” Cole said to his grandma in a huff. “Needed some air.”

“I don’t think you got enough, child,” his grandma said.

Of course it was a memorial. It couldn’t be anything else. Ten years. Cole sat down on the couch aggressively, his arms crossed. His auntie entered from the kitchen with a cup of coffee. There was always a cup of coffee involved when she had a night shift coming up.

“What’s up with you?” Auntie Joan asked.

“Nothing.” After that, Cole went quiet. He found a spot on the floor, a discoloured area in the hardwood, and stared at it.

“That sort of *nothing* means a whole lot of *something*, Cole,” Auntie Joan said.

He was still quiet.

“The quieter you are, the more you have to say.”

“I don’t want to talk about it.”

“Your father was like that,” his grandma said. “He’d come into a room with steam coming out of his ears. He’d sit down and look like he was ready to explode. ‘I don’t want to talk about it,’ he’d tell me and your mom. But when he started talking, well...let’s just say I put on a pot of coffee.”

“I don’t drink coffee,” Cole grumbled.

“I just had the last cup anyways.” Auntie Joan plopped down on the couch beside him. She took a sip of her drink, then placed it on the coffee table. She looked Cole dead in the eyes. “Now, that’s enough, Cole. Out with it.”

Cole leaned forward and buried his head in his hands. “None of it is going to go away, is it?”

“Not if you don’t let it,” Auntie Joan said.

“What’s troubling you?” his grandmother asked.

Cole came up for air. “Ashley’s asking me to come home. I mean, go to Wounded Sky. You know, just when I think I’m over it...” Cole started, but trailed off, as though all of his words got sucked up into the dark spot on the floor.

Auntie Joan was tight-lipped. She looked like she was going to explode, just like her brother used to.

“But you aren’t over it, *nósisim*. You never have been.” His grandmother looked decidedly less combustible than his auntie.

“He said it’s not because of some memorial they’re having, but I bet it is.” Cole stood up from the couch and started pacing around the room. “I bet they just want me there to be their poster boy or something, and I’ll have to stand up in front of everybody and I’ll feel like puking all over them. I will literally puke all over them, I bet. It’ll be like *Carrie*, only with puke. You know how I get in front of crowds.”

“You’re simply not going back there. *Ever*.” Auntie Joan’s teeth gritted like she might turn them into powder. “It’s not even a consideration.” She took another, longer sip of her coffee.

“And what if it *is* about a memorial?” his grandma asked.

“Mother!” Auntie Joan hissed and stood up from the couch.

“Well, don’t you think it might help Cole to face that, Joan?”

For a moment, Cole may as well have not been in the room. His grandmother and his auntie were in a full-on stare down.

“It’ll help if he never goes back there, and you know it,” Auntie Joan said to his grandmother. “He is not going back there.” She turned to him and said, “You are not going back there,” as if he hadn’t heard her say it the first time.

“I think we should at least consider—” his grandmother started.

“And who’s going to pay for it, huh?” Auntie Joan went into the kitchen and dumped her coffee out, only so she could slam the cup into the kitchen sink. “I work these shifts just to pay for rent and food. Do you know how much it costs to fly there?”

“And how much would you pay for Cole to heal?” his grandmother asked.

"That's not fair," Auntie Joan said.

Cole dropped his arms to his sides, exasperated. "I have my tuition money."

"You just sounded like you didn't want to go!" His auntie returned to the living room, fired up. "Now you want to throw away your future? For what?"

"Maybe it's important!" Cole said.

"University is important. Rehashing tragedy is not."

"Maybe I'll get that scholarship."

"Maybe? Maybe?" That was all Auntie Joan was capable of saying right then. "*Please* side with me here, Mother."

"Look." His grandmother got up and walked over to Cole. She put her hand on his shoulder. "We can't tell you what to do, Cole. You're a man now. We brought you away to protect you. You don't need that protection anymore."

"Protect me from what?" Cole asked.

"From all the—" But that was as far as Auntie Joan got.

"All I am saying," his grandmother interrupted forcefully, "is that maybe you need to think about what's best for *you* long-term. Not us." She shot a look at Auntie Joan there. "*You*."

"We haven't even prepared him for this." Auntie Joan stepped closer to Cole and his grandmother.

"You're right," his grandmother said. "We've been shielding him for too long, and what good has it done, really?"

"I'm right here, by the way," Cole said, but perhaps his real response was how he began to trace the outline of the medicine bottle protruding from his pants pocket. What good *had* it done, whatever he was being shielded from? He was a bundle of nerves, always. Could going home change that?

"Where do you want your nephew to be ten years from now? Twenty years from now? For him to still be dealing with it like he has been? Like we've been making him deal with it? What will his years be like?"

“His years will be safe,” Auntie Joan said. “We’ve done this all to keep you safe, Cole.”

Cole slid his foot over the discoloured patch, and then looked up at them. “I want to go. This is my decision. Let me take out my tuition money. I’ll work more. I’ll get it back.”

“We can make it work,” his grandmother said to his auntie. Then, as though conceding the decision to her daughter, she gave Cole a smile, and left the room. She went down the hallway, towards her bedroom.

Cole and his auntie stood there, staring at each other. They said a lot in that silence. Cole did his best to look strong, but felt anything but. Maybe she saw that in him. Maybe that’s exactly what she was looking at: if he could take it. “You know I only want what’s best for you.”

“I know,” Cole said, “I do too. And I feel like I have to do this.”

“That’s the thing, though, Cole. I don’t think you *can* do this.”

“That’s not your decision.”

“I’m sorry,” his auntie said. “But it is. You’re not going. I’m not giving you my money, or your tuition money, to see you torn apart.”

Cole shook his head and looked up at the ceiling. A thousand responses went through his mind, but he said none of them. All he could muster was, “Fine!” and then he left the living room on his way to his bedroom. There, he settled into bed, his head propped up on a pillow, with Bon Iver playing through speakers on his desk across the room. The curtains were drawn, he was immersed in complete darkness, he was doing his breathing, but after listening to *22, A Million* three times through, he just felt angry. He knew what was best for his life, not her. He could’ve handled St. John’s High School. He didn’t need the shelter of Kelvin. And he could’ve stayed in Wounded Sky all this time, too, couldn’t he? He could’ve stayed there, stayed with his friends. He wouldn’t have felt like Eva hated him now, wouldn’t be afraid to even send her a text to say hello.

As an act of defiance, even though going to Wounded Sky wasn’t in the cards without his auntie’s approval, he sat up in his bed, opened his laptop, and looked up flights from Winnipeg to Wounded Sky First Nation. Ashley had been right about the times. There was a flight tonight

at 10:00 p.m., and another tomorrow at 3:00 p.m. He went through the process of booking a flight for 3:00 p.m. tomorrow. He went all the way to the checkout, but ended up slamming the laptop shut.

*Breathe in for five seconds. Hold it. Breathe out for seven.*

He lay back down, head propped up against the pillow. Music washed over him.

COLE: **Sorry. I can't come.**

Cole was with Eva. They were children again. Seven years old. They were in a field, and it was night. There was nobody, nothing around them. Just the field, stretching for eternity. She was dancing like there was music. She looked like a poem, like the northern lights overhead. "Dance with me," she said. He was standing in place, his body subtly swaying to the unheard rhythm. She spun around, arms high in the air. When she faced him again, she was seventeen. Her dress moved through the air like smoke. There was music. He heard the music. "Dance with me." She reached for him. Beautiful music. He whistled along, and reached for her hand. The lights above came down to them. To her. Ribbons of colour wrapped around her, took her up, danced with her there. "Cole!" He reached for her. She was too high.

"Cole."

"Eva," he said.

"No, n6sisim."

Cole opened his eyes. It was light out. Even with the heavy navy curtains drawn, he could tell it was morning. His grandmother was sitting at the edge of his bed, patting his leg.

"You were having a nightmare."

"Sort of." He sat up and leaned against the headboard. "Sort of a dream, sort of a nightmare."

"You're already there, aren't you?"

"Wounded Sky? I don't know where it was. It was about—"

"Sometimes, a place isn't just a town, but the people too. They *are* that place, in a way."

"You're sounding very Elder-y right now, Grandma."

His grandmother gave his leg one more pat, and then she placed an envelope on the bed and slid it over to Cole. He opened it.

“Grandma, you can’t do this.” There was a stack of money in the envelope. Probably close to \$2,000. Cole didn’t count it, just flipped through the bills with his thumb.

“I can do whatever I please with my money,” she said.

“Where did you get all of this?” Cole asked.

“It doesn’t matter.” She stood up from the bed. “I want you to use that. Go home, do what you have to do. It really is your decision.”

“What about Auntie Joan?”

She looked behind her, like she could see through walls. “Fast asleep. She had a night shift. She’ll be sleeping for a while yet.”

“She’ll kill me.”

“You let me worry about my daughter.” His grandmother had been clutching something in her left hand. She extended that hand, hesitantly, to Cole, opened it. A tobacco tie was resting in her palm. Cole shook his head, gently closed his grandmother’s fingers around the red bundle.

“Nósisim.”

“No thanks, Grandma. I don’t want—I don’t need it.”

“Cole. All these years, you’ve been avoiding part of who you are, our traditions, culture. You won’t speak our language. But, nósisim, these are the things that would help you be strong. Isn’t that what you want?”

“You’re wrong. That...it just makes me hurt more. It just reminds me.”

“It should remind you of the good *in* us, not the bad that has happened *to* us.”

“I’m sorry, I...” Cole trailed off. Just closed his eyes and sighed.

“If not for you, then for me.”

He felt his grandmother’s touch. She turned his left hand over, uncurled his fingers, and placed the tobacco in his hand, over a large, ugly scar that stretched from one side of his palm to the other. He closed his hand.

“Lay this for me, at the memorial. Say a prayer, for me. Would you do that for your old kókom?”

“Yeah, sure. I will. For you.”

His grandmother looked at her watch carefully, then at Cole. “Now, you slept in, nósisim. It’s almost noon and I think your flight leaves at 3 p.m. You have some packing to do, and you should leave quietly. Your auntie isn’t the heaviest sleeper.”

“How’d you know when the flight leaves?” Cole asked.

“Your computer said so.”

“I lock my computer.”

“Now, Cole, I might be ‘Elder-y,’ but even I know that a name isn’t the best password. Especially a three-letter one.”



## LITTLE EARTHQUAKES

**THE LAST TIME COLE HAD BEEN ON A PLANE** was to leave Wounded Sky First Nation. Back then he was nervous to go, nervous about what the city would hold for him. He could still remember the feeling he had, perhaps a harbinger of what was to come. He remembered walking to the plane on the tarmac, his stomach turning, his heart racing, his palms soaked with sweat. He kept rubbing them against his pants. Now he was nervous to return. His body was shaking as though the plane was going through turbulence.

Wounded Sky never did get many visitors, only pilots stopping over when making food deliveries. Nobody really came by car, not over the winter road, not on the old, rusted ferry that could carry one car at a time over Silk River. There was food on the plane Cole was on now. When he was little he would look up at these little twin engine planes, and wonder what was on them. He never thought it was something as benign as groceries. Cole wondered if there was a kid like that now, down there on the ground somewhere, looking up and wondering what the plane was bringing in. What would that kid think if he or she knew it was Cole Harper? What stories had the kid been told by their parents about him, that he was a freak...or a hero?

Cole had been on the plane for two hours now. He'd been looking down for the whole flight, watching the city disappear into a kids' model of the urban landscape, watching the highways shrink into grey veins nestled in the green skin of Mother Earth, watching how everything seemed so small, even his worries. But when the plane began

to descend, and he saw Wounded Sky choked against the horizon by Blackwood Forest and pierced by Silk River, those worries started to feel too big for him.

The sun was just starting to set when the plane landed on the perilously thin landing strip. He hadn't known what to expect when he landed during the plane ride, but he'd imagined a small crowd gathered by the airstrip, waiting to see him come back home, maybe cheering for him. With signs. Cardboard signs with sharpie words: *Welcome home, hero. Thank you, Cole! Cole H. for Hero!* A prodigal-son-returns kind of vibe. He remembered the attention he got back then. All the eyes on him. All the questions. He understood why he'd been taken away from that. But maybe he was ready for it now. Maybe it'd be cathartic. A healing. Then he'd imagined only his best friends from Wounded Sky being there. Eva. Brady. Ashley—the people who used to matter most to him. Who still mattered most to him. Distance hadn't changed that, at least for him. A large crowd might've been cathartic, but those three, that would've been something else entirely. He'd almost prefer a crowd. He wanted to see them, especially Eva, but at the same time, he didn't. At the same time, thinking of seeing them, of seeing her, felt overwhelming. He went over his latest text exchange with Ashley, trying to keep the phone steady, and to dissect whether or not Ashley would've told Brady and Eva that he was coming home.

**COLE: Guess what? See you later today! But you didn't have to lie to me about the memorial. I know that's why you asked me back.**

**ASHLEY: Really? Just like that?**

**COLE: Yeah, just like that.**

**ASHLEY: It wasn't about the memorial though. Just saying.**

**COLE: What was it about then?**

**ASHLEY: Come see me when you're in. When are you coming?**

**COLE: Get in around 6 p.m.**

**ASHLEY: Kk. See you then. Maybe come to see you in.**

**COLE: Anybody else?**

There was no answer to that question, but Cole found that he was disappointed when he stepped off the plane, his bag slung sadly over

his shoulder. There was no crowd, no Brady, no Eva. Not even Ashley. Could everything that happened ten years ago mean so little now, that the seven-year-old kid who'd saved some lives didn't deserve any sort of welcome? Maybe this was best. *If I don't like a basketball crowd, a Wounded Sky First Nation welcoming committee would be pretty harsh.* It was never going to be cathartic. And he could understand Brady and Eva not being there. Cole hadn't texted them. He hadn't contacted them in ten years. Even if Ashley had let them know, they might not have shown up. But, Ashley not being there?

COLE: **Here. Where are you?**

Cole waited for a response for several minutes, standing just yards away from the airport, staring not at the beauty the surrounding forest boasted or the vastness of the country sky, but at his phone. Nothing.

"Why'd I bother doing this?" He'd been begged to come. It was *so* urgent. Yet there he was, alone, with nothing but time to welcome him here. The plane was still there. It was going to sit there until it was unloaded and then it was going to leave, back to Winnipeg. If it were leaving anyway, then maybe the pilot would take him. But what would he say to his grandmother? The flight had cost almost \$1,000. He could've bought a car for that. No, he couldn't just leave. He owed it to her to stay until the memorial, lay the tobacco she'd given him, get it over with, and go back to the city. Plus, staying meant the added bonus of not having to face his auntie right now. He'd ignored about one thousand of her calls by now. His grandmother was dealing with her, and that was something else he owed her for.

"Fine, okay," he said to himself. "You win."

COLE: **Whatever. I'll come there.**

He pocketed his phone, swallowed his pride, and started on the short walk into the community.

Cole expected everything he saw and everything he came across would stir emotions, jog his memory, but the first thing he actually encountered sent him reeling: the old research facility. The place where his father had worked... and died. It was obviously still abandoned, no doubt since the accident that had taken his father's life. The windows were boarded up, a large chain sealed the front door,

and the entire building itself was enclosed by a metal fence that let off a constant humming noise. Cole walked towards the building. He couldn't count how many times he had come here as a child with his mom to see his dad for lunch. He and his mom would pack a sandwich, usually peanut butter and jam, and some kind of fruit. He preferred apples. They mostly brought apples. The picnic table they sat on to eat together was still there. Cole reached out his hand to open the gate—

“Stop!” a voice shouted.

Cole's hand recoiled, and he turned around to see a security guard running up to him from a short way down the perimeter of the fence, handcuffs jingling from his belt.

“Don't touch that!” The security guard stopped inches away from Cole.

Cole didn't know if he recognized the man, his face hidden behind a pair of sunglasses and a black baseball hat pulled down low. The man rested his hand on the grip of his gun. Cole backed away a little.

“Sorry,” he said with his hands up in a defensive posture.

“Wait a minute,” the guard said. “Are you—”

“Cole Harper.”

“—Cole Harper, back from the dead.”

“I don't...”

“Sorry, how insensitive of me, considerin' why you left in the first place. Back home, are you? What brings you here, city boy?”

“Can you...” Cole motioned to the man's gun. The man looked down and laughed, then took his hand off the grip.

“Sorry, hero.” The guard reached up and took off his sunglasses, and Cole recognized him as Scott Thomas, an older kid from the elementary school back in the day. He was kind of a bully back then. It made sense, him having a gun. “So, what're you doin' here, city boy?”

Cole took a deep breath. “I heard there was a memorial coming up, for the...you know.”

“Right, right, right,” Scott breathed. “Right. Yeah, Tuesday.”

“Tuesday,” Cole said.

“Well, good for you, Cole. Leave everybody here to suffer through it all together, save whoever the fuck you wanna, and then come back to soak in the awe and wonder of your return. Right?”

“Save whoever the...no, it's not like that, man.”

“Hey.” Scott reached forward and slapped Cole on the shoulder. “I'm just screwin' with you, guy. It's all good.”

Cole, sensing now that he could change the subject (desperate, in fact, to change the subject) motioned to the fence, and the building. “So what's up with all of this? Are you guarding this place?”

“Yep.”

“Why? I mean, what's there to guard?”

Scott took the bill of his cap and moved it up and down a few times, then let out a big breath and shrugged. “Kids are always comin' around here, tryin' to get inside. You know what happened here, city boy.”

“Right, sure,” Cole said. “I just thought, I don't know, it would've been cleaned up by now.”

“Ha! You're funny, guy. You think whoever ran this place gave a shit about cleanin' up their goddamn mess? Far as anybody knows, shit's still messed inside. Hell, your old man's still down there, rottin' away.”

“Screw you, Scott.”

“*And* that chick. Both of them. Worm food. And kids, y'know, they wanna go check it out, see a dead body. It's like *Stand by Me* or somethin'.”

“Shut up!”

“Sorry, that was rude of me. Where are my manners?”

“I'm out of here.” Cole turned to leave.

“What's your rush?” Scott grabbed Cole's shoulder.

Cole jerked it away. “What's it to you?”

“I just thought we could spend some quality time together. Everybody else is at the hockey game anyways.”

*Of course.* It was Saturday. How stupid of him. Saturday was hockey night in Wounded Sky, the reason Ashley wasn't there to greet him at

the airport, and everybody else. Nobody missed hockey night. Not even, it turned out, Cole.

“Yeah, that’s where I’m headed.”

A path ambled its way to Wounded Sky from the airport. It forked off twice on the way to the community’s perimeter, once towards the old research facility, and the second time towards Cole’s former elementary school. Cole took the forked path. He stopped where it stopped. He stood there facing the school a couple of hundred yards away. Only the skeleton of a school remained, a collection of concrete and brick bones, broken and charred. Small sections of the school appeared undamaged by the fire. Bigger sections were completely destroyed, laying in piles on the ground, untouched in ten years and overgrown with grass and weeds. He could see hallways with partial walls, or no walls whatsoever, extend out from the front of the school to the left, where classrooms once were, and to the right, all the way to the gym, with its crumbled walls, ceiling, and metal beams piled on top of each other.

Cole’s knees began to shake and weaken. He heard the screams of children. They erupted from the ruins and echoed deep inside Blackwood Forest. Flames roared, thunderous and terrible. He saw everything around him—the grass, the trees, the path to the school—painted in yellow and orange and red. He saw black smoke spiralling into the sky. His heart began to race. He could feel his pulse pound through every vein. Sweat and tears dripped down his face. He felt dizzy and his vision began to blur. He reached out instinctively to steady himself. A hand grasped his wrist.

“Hey, what’s up with you?” a girl’s voice asked.

“Huh?”

Cole looked to the side, where he saw Alex Captain. Alex had been in grade one when Cole was in grade three. She must’ve been fifteen or sixteen now. Her father was a teacher at the school, and was in the building when it burned down. He recognized the loss in her eyes, a kind of emptiness that couldn’t be filled. He knew that look was in his own eyes, too.

"It looks like there's a tiny earthquake right under your feet. Centralized," Alex said. She was pointing at his feet, at an imaginary earthquake.

"Oh, no. It's more like—"

"Either that or you're drunk," she kept on. "Please don't be drunk. Don't be like those Saturday night hockey idiots. They pour into The Fish after the game, all of them, order the whole menu, and, you know, a third of it ends up in their stomachs, a third of it ends up on the tables or walls or floor, and a third of it gets puked up on the grass outside the building. *Awesome.*"

The Fish was really The Northern Lights Diner. It'd been called that for as long as Cole could remember, probably since time immemorial. Named after the fact that most of its best dishes, most of its dishes *period*, contained jackfish. And there was also a jackfish on the sign, not, as one might think, the northern lights.

"I'm not drunk. It's just tough being here, I guess."

"Waitaminute." Alex leaned in closer and took a good look at him. "Cole?"

"Yep."

"Holy shit!" Alex backed away, slapped her knees, and spun in a complete circle in disbelief. "What the heck're you doing out here?"

"Like here?" Cole pointed to his feet, to the imaginary tiny earthquake.

"No, here, obviously." Alex spread her arms out wide. "Wounded Sky."

Cole shrugged. "Not sure. I could ask you the same thing."

"You mean *here*. Like *here* here. Not here. I live here." Alex was pointing all over the place now, just messing with him.

"Sure." Cole managed a chuckle. "I thought it was mandatory attendance at the arena on Saturday nights."

"*Please*. I defy hockey, Cole. I defy the expectations of hockey worship as a Wounded Sky band member. I'd rather clean up puke out front of The Fish."

"Gross," Cole said.

"I'm walking, I'll have you know. I go for walks. My shift hasn't started yet, so..."

"You work at the diner now?"

"Ever since I could. You know, if a job comes open in Wounded Sky you have to snatch it up. There're only so many of them."

"Right."

They encountered their first silence. It teetered on the edge of awkward, but it was far better than what he had experienced with Scott. Cole felt encouraged. There'd been no welcoming party, but there was this.

"What about you?" Alex asked. "Where are you headed? Here, then over there, then all around everywhere? Trying to find a good door frame for refuge from the earthquake?"

"Actually, I'm one of the sheep," Cole said. "Headed to the arena for the hockey game."

"Oh, fun! I'll walk with you," Alex said, as though she hadn't just trashed the sport and the hockey worship that was evidently still prevalent in the community.

Alex started on her way before Cole had even moved. When he did step forward, back towards the main path, his knees were steady, and he became aware that his entire body was calm. He hadn't even taken a pill. He met up with her as the short trail to the school grounds converged with the main pathway, and they walked together from there.

"Thanks," Cole said.

"Oh," Alex said, "I was heading that way anyway. My kindness is out of convenience."

"Still," Cole said.

"I guess I *did* save you from certain death."



## EPILOGUE

**COLE STOPPED ONLY FOR A MOMENT**, then walked off the pathway and into the field. One step after another, the school ruins drew closer. He didn't feel weak. His knees felt stable, his hands steady—heartbeat, too. No threat of fainting, no profuse sweating. His palms were dry. Maybe he had come this far in a short time. After all, so much had happened. The pill bottle holding his last two pills was in his pocket, but Cole wasn't tapping at it, wasn't endlessly deciding whether to take one or not. He wasn't thinking about it much. Maybe it was the tobacco bundle, held firmly in his left hand. Maybe he was drawing strength from it—from a medicine that he had neglected for far too long, medicine from the ancestors he was about to offer it to, from the Creator he was about to pray to.

He walked up the concrete steps, stopped at where the doors used to be. They were mostly gone now, burned into nothing. All that remained were the handles, resting on the ground by Cole's feet. He crouched down and picked one of them up. He thought about scars, and what Elder Mariah had told him. The ones on his palms, the memories they held, were important in their own right. But the scars were hard, and the memories were always conflicted. The one on his chest meant something else, and he hoped he could keep it. He wasn't sure how this particular gift worked, or if because he'd healed so fast, the scar would fade away. But it would remind him of something... good. He stopped the killer. No more people were going to die. What's more, Eva was talking to him now. Nicely. Maybe people would stop

talking about him, too, in the way they had. Thanks to Choch, Cole didn't even have to address the bent prison bars. Choch fixed them, good as new.

Cole put the handle down, and opened the tobacco tie. He spread the tobacco across the steps, and closed his eyes. "Creator. I...I don't really know how to do this anymore. It's like I'm learning how, all over again. It's weird, too, knowing that you're actually listening. I guess I was never really sure. After the fire, I thought you weren't there at all. I don't know what to say. I guess I just want you to keep them safe. I want you to welcome Ashley and Alex and Maggie, everybody who got sick and didn't make it, home. Just, you know, don't let Choch keep them waiting, or whatever. And I want you to protect everybody else too. Protect Brady. Eva." Cole opened his eyes. He placed the red cloth down, moved the handle over it to hold it there. "That's it. That's all I have to say. Ekosani. Thanks for bringing me here."

"Uhhhh, to be fair, He didn't actually bring you here. I did."

Cole shook his head and let out a breath. He didn't get up. "How long have you been standing there for?"

"It's just that, I'm not one to complain, but don't you think little old me deserves *some* thanks? I mean, what did He do, anyway? He's probably binge-watching *American Gods* or something."

"*Fine*. Thank you for fixing the prison bars, and for making everybody think they'd just forgot to lock me in."

"Oh, and don't forget—"

"Don't push it." Cole got up now. He got to his feet, turned around, and faced the spirit being. "You look the worst I've ever seen you."

Gone were the bright suit, dress shoes, and top hat. He wasn't wearing his outfit from the diner, either. No, today he was wearing a Nickelback t-shirt, a backwards baseball hat, black Converse sneakers, and blue jeans that hung below his ass. To top off the outfit, he had a backpack slung over his shoulders.

Choch plopped down on the steps facing Blackwood Forest. He dropped the backpack, which landed heavily on the ground. He patted the concrete to his side, and Cole begrudgingly sat down beside him. The sky was pretty in the early evening, painted in autumn hues. Cole

thought he could feel the warmth from it, as though Jayne were sitting at his side. He almost felt like he could tolerate Choch.

“Dude,” Choch said, “my outfit is on fleek, bruh.”

“Fleek? Bruh?”

Choch took a deep, exaggerated breath, and rolled his eyes slowly, making sure that Cole saw it. “I am being,” he said dramatically, “Collo—”

“Kids don’t talk like that. *Ever.*”

“What, really? They don’t?”

“No, they talk like regular human beings. This isn’t a teenage drama on the CW,” Cole said.

“Well, it’s not *quite* like that, anyway,” Choch grumbled, looking off somewhere. Cole snapped his fingers to draw Choch’s attention.

“Also, you look like a *forty-year-old man* talking like a teenager on a CW teenage drama,” Cole added.

Choch leaned back and looked Cole over carefully, paying special attention to Cole’s chest.

“So, how are you?”

“Fine,” Cole said. “Really good, actually. I feel like Wolverine. But generally, yeah, just good.”

“That has to be a nice change of pace, hasn’t it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“You’re less confused than you were before, then?” Choch asked.

“A little bit, yeah,” Cole said. “I can connect most of the dots. I mean, I’d like to know about what happened to the folder...” Choch nodded throughout Cole’s answer, like a psychologist. It looked extremely odd to Cole, watching Choch give all the psychologist vibes while dressed like some weird teenager. “But I’m guessing Jayne’s already, you know,” Cole motioned up to the autumn sky with his finger, even made an odd spaceship-taking-off kind of sound, “up where she’s supposed to be. It’s not a big deal, really.”

“Actually, I just can’t seem to tear her away from her friends over there at the cemetery,” Choch said. “She’s a stubborn one, her. I mean,

cute as a button, but you can just *imagine* trying to get her to eat her Brussels sprouts, am-I-right?”

“Why are you even giving her a choice?” Cole asked. “Just put her where she’s supposed to be. The deal’s done. The killer’s caught, people are going to get the cure...forget I even mentioned the file, okay?”

Choch took a good long look at Cole. He picked up the backpack, and placed it on his lap. He began to tap at it thoughtfully. “Here’s the thing, Coley-B—sorry, CB. Do you like CB?”

“Whatever, sure.”

“Here’s the thing, CB. Jayne’s kind of, sort of, not quite able to go home *just* yet. And you never know, the whereabouts of that folder might come in handy.”

“What? What are you talking about?”

Choch took a bunch of textbooks out of the backpack and placed them in front of Cole, one by one. Cheerfully, Choch asked, “Did you hear they lifted the curfew? School’s back on, starting Monday! I took the liberty of getting *exactly* what you’ll need. And I’ll even arrange a tutor for you. Except in math, of course, Mr. Eighty-seven percent! *Eva*, anybody? Huh? She’d for sure get you an *A* in Land-Based Education.”

Cole picked up one of the textbooks, entitled *Canada: A Country of Change*, and dismissively fingered through the pages before placing it back on the pile. “This is such a load of shit.”

“Come on! It’ll be fun!” Choch said excitedly. When he saw Cole’s reaction, though—shocked, disgusted, angry, take your pick—he added a *very* weak, “Yaaaaaay.”

“I’m going home. I’m done. I did everything I was supposed to do,” Cole said.

“Oh no, my dear child. I’m afraid you’re only getting started.”

*To be continued...*



## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

**THIS NOVEL STARTED ABOUT TEN YEARS AGO.** I was talking to my friend Jeff about stories. That conversation gave birth to *The Reckoner*. Since then it's been this weird little kid I've raised. Like a kid, it's annoyed me, challenged me, and brightened my day. It has grown, matured, and, ultimately made me better.

I've had help along the way. Jeff Ryzner brainstormed with me, acting as my sounding board. David Jón Fuller read a very old version of the novel, and gave me some needed feedback. (*Very old version is right. Mr. Robertson here wrote this novel like 43 times before it was any good.*) There were others (not Choch), too. Sara Snow, who loves this world almost as much as I do. Scott Henderson helped me envision some of the characters and locations early on. Debra Dudek and Doug Whiteway took time to read over story concepts and offer their thoughts. Warren Cariou, my friend and mentor.

There are the usual suspects too. My parents have been there with me, and believed in me, since the beginning. My wife supports this little habit of mine in so many ways. My children motivate me in everything I do. My brothers, in-laws, friends, have all pushed me forward and lifted me up when I've needed it. And, of course, HighWater Press is like a second family to me.

But there is one person I want to thank most of all, and that's Desirae Warkentin, my editor. Yes, she made me rewrite *Strangers* at least twice (not 43 times), but whether it was offering up her expertise in the YA genre or taking phone calls from me to vent or toss around ideas,

I know this book wouldn't be what it is without her. We get to do this two more times! Thanks so much, Dee.

Sorry if I've missed anybody, but... *(please, I'll just say it: Mr. Robertson is a scatterbrained idiot. Honestly, if you ask his wife, she'll tell you. He forgets everything. I mean, this one time—) ...sigh.* You get the point.

Ekosani, Dave



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR



**DAVID A. ROBERTSON** is an award-winning author of several works, including the critically acclaimed children's book *When We Were Alone* (illustrated by Julie Flett). He wrote the novel *The Evolution of Alice*, and a number of graphic nov-

els, including *7 Generations: A Plains Cree Saga*, *Betty: The Helen Betty Osborne Story*, *Will I See?*, and *Sugar Falls*. His short stories and poetry can be found in various literary journals. Through his work, David tries to educate as much as entertain. His books are about Indigenous Peoples—their cultures, histories, communities, and contemporary issues. When he's not writing, David is usually driving around one or more of his five children, thanking his wife for her incredible support in bios, or working in the field of Indigenous education. He is a Norway House Cree Nation band member, and lives in Winnipeg.

HIGHWATER  
PRESS 

[WWW.HIGHWATERPRESS.COM](http://WWW.HIGHWATERPRESS.COM)

cover art by Peter Diamond

*Strangers might be the best and most unique YA Indigenous supernatural mystery I've read, and Coyote is a character for the ages. You'll fall in love with him at first sight.*

— C. CHOCHINOV, Literary Expert/Canonical Conniver

*Strangers has it all—vivid and imaginatively crafted characters, a propulsive and energetic plot, brilliant dialogue, and a series of mysteries that make us think in a new way about the world we inhabit. The story skillfully unfolds, and the characters—the spirit beings and the human ones—are utterly convincing. This book is a page turner and lingers in the memory. The story will resonate with and enthrall everyone, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers.*

— WARREN CARIOU, Canada Research Chair and Director  
Centre for Creative Writing and Oral Culture  
University of Manitoba